

Kohlberg's stages of Moral Development

Leaving Certificate Section D Moral Decision Making

Part 4 Moral Development

Topic 4.1 Towards moral maturity

Topic	Description of Content	Outcomes
4.1 Towards moral maturity	○ Growing in maturity from childhood to adulthood ○ ○ ○	As a result of studying this section, students should be able to ○ Name a moral theorist and give an account of the stages in personal moral development presented in his/her theories ○ ○ ○

Please note that the following article is background information only on this topic. It in no way constitutes a sample or exemplary answer on this topic

Lawrence Kohlberg is a moral theorist who has written much on the subject of moral reasoning and moral development. Having studied the great educationalist, Jean Piaget, Kohlberg was particularly interested in the way in which children responded to moral dilemmas. In 1958 he wrote his doctoral thesis at the University of Chicago and the subject of his study was his theory on the stages of moral development.

According to Kohlberg's theory, there are six clearly identifiable stages of moral development from childhood to mature adulthood. The stages are progressive, and each stage builds on the previous one and is more complex than the previous one. He believed that the primary focus of moral development was the concern with justice and that this concern developed with most people as they matured. In carrying out his research, Kohlberg used stories containing moral dilemmas with his research subjects. He was keen to discover how people would justify their actions if they were faced with moral dilemmas similar to the ones in the stories. He postulated that there were six stages of moral development and that these could be classified within three levels: pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional. His theory presumes that these are constructive, developmental stages whereby each level and each stage is more advanced and more adequate in responding to moral dilemmas. The following table gives an outline of Kohlberg's three levels and six stages of moral development:

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Pre-Conventional Level	Conventional Level	Post-Conventional Level
1. Obedience and punishment orientation	3. Interpersonal accord and conformity	5. Social contract orientation (Compromise and democracy)

(Act to get rewarded and avoid punishment)	(The good boy/nice girl attitude)	
2. Self-interest orientation (What's in it for me?)	4. Authority and social –order maintaining orientation (Law and order morality)	6. Universal ethical principles orientation (Principled conscience)

Level 1: Pre-Conventional

Moral development during childhood (age 4-10 approx) is mostly concerned with the pre-conventional level. However, it is possible for adults to get “stuck” at this level of moral reasoning also. The pre-conventional level is characterised by judgment of actions according to their direct consequences. This level is egocentric: the child sees morality in terms of how actions will have consequences, good and bad, for them. His/her own needs and desires are paramount.

Stage 1: Obedience and Punishment Orientation

The child is concerned only with the direct consequences of his/her actions on him/herself. A young child will usually want to receive love, affection and approval from a parent figure. Therefore he/she will often try to do things that will elicit that response of approval from the parent figure. This then, is internalised as a morally good action. Similarly, a child usually will want to avoid punishment from a parent figure. An action that elicits a punitive response is equated with a morally wrong action and should therefore be avoided. The more severe the punishment for an action is, the more morally “bad” that action becomes in the mind of the child. There is no real understanding by the child that other people may have different points of view to him/her. Blind egoism underpins this stage. Morality is a fairly black and white area: good actions bring rewards, bad actions bring punishments.

Stage 2: Self interest orientation / Instrumental Relativist orientation

An underlying selfishness permeates the moral reasoning of a child at stage two. A good action is seen as one that is in the best interest of the individual. There is a limited interest in the needs of others, but only in so far as these might serve the individual interests of the child. Favours may be done for another child so that in return favours will be returned by the other. Lies could be told to cover for another so that in return a similar favour is owed to the individual. The underlying concern of stage thinking is “what’s in it for me”. “I will be really quiet when I’m playing so that I get rewarded with sweets.” Concern for others is not based on a deep loyalty to them at this stage, but on an ulterior motive: if I do something helpful for another then they will do something for me. The world is viewed as morally relative at this stage. It is recognised that others have goals and preferences and the individual must choose whether to conform or deviate from the norms. There is an instrumental egoism underpinning moral reasoning at this stage.

Level 2: Conventional

Stages 3 and 4 fall within the conventional level of moral reasoning. This level is typical for many adolescence (age 10-13 approx) and also some adults. The primary focus of the conventional level is judging the morality of actions by comparing them to the views and expectations of society and trying to please others by maintaining the conventional order.

Stage 3: Interpersonal accord and conformity / Good Boy/Nice Girl Orientation

Individuals at this stage of moral reasoning will try to win the approval of others so that their identity is perceived as good. The acceptance of the individual by the peer group has a huge impact in terms of what actions are considered good or bad. At this stage people tend to judge the morality of actions in terms of evaluating their consequences in relation to a person's relationships. Good and bad intentions are recognised. People want their relationships to be characterised by respect, gratitude and treating others as we wish to be treated. A good action is therefore one that will bring about this positive result. Conforming to the rules and authority of parents, school and society etc is useful only in so far as they support these social roles. The focus is not on the consequences of actions but on the intentions. Once an individual can stand over an action and justify it on the grounds that they meant well, the action is seen as morally good, even if it also has some negative consequences. Approval and disapproval from other people reflects society's accordance with the perceived role. Trying to be a good boy/girl is a way of trying to live up to society's expectations. It is an individualistic approach to morality and carries a social relationships perspective.

Stage 4: Authority and social order maintenance orientation / Law and Order Orientation

The desire to have a functioning society is at the heart of this stage of moral reasoning. Laws, norms and conventions become very important in so far as they maintain a functioning society. People at this stage of moral reasoning have moved beyond the strong need for individual approval associated with stage three. The concern at stage four is transcending individual needs in favour of the needs of society as a whole. Breaking a law is seen as morally wrong and the person is seen as responsible for committing that wrong. Therefore, culpability is important. "I must pay attention in school because it is against the rules to be disruptive". The individual is able to recognise abstract normative systems so it is sometimes referred to as the social systems perspective. There is an understanding at this stage that all people have a duty and an obligation to uphold the laws and rules, whether in school, work, religion or society. Taken to its extreme, this black and white type of thinking carries with it the danger of fundamentalism, where

there is a rigid and tightly controlled enforcement of various rules and laws and no exceptions are made for transgressing them.

Level 3: Post-Conventional

This is the principled level of moral reasoning and it consists of stages five and six. It is characterised by an awareness that individuals cannot be equated with society and that one's own perspective should be viewed before society's. Morality is about principles at this level. This is not to be confused with the more selfish egocentric thinking of the pre-conventional stages. One's own views are critically examined in the light of society's rules and standards at level three. Usually it begins in adolescence and continues throughout adulthood, although not all individuals reach this stage of moral reasoning.

Stage 5: Social contract orientation

At this stage it is recognised that individuals can hold different opinions and values and these should be respected impartially. It is believed that contracts will allow the individual and society to both increase their welfare. It is therefore known as a contractual perspective. Freedom of choice becomes important and certain fundamental principles are upheld, such as the right to life and the right to choose. At this stage, no single choice is seen as right or absolute since others do not have the moral authority to judge the actions of the individual. Laws are seen less as rigid dictums and more as social contracts. Laws, however, continue to be very important. "I have to go to school because it is the law of the land". It is important to pay individual taxes so that services such as health care can be provided for society. Laws that are perceived not to promote the welfare of members of society should be changed so that the greatest good can be achieved for the greatest number of people (utilitarian perspective). Democracy and the democratic process becomes important since laws are changed through the majority decision and compromises have to be accepted in the interest of the majority good. Democratic forms of government are based on stage five of moral reasoning.

Stage 6: Universal ethical principles orientation

Moral reasoning is based on abstract reasoning at this stage. Conscience is seen as an important factor in making moral decisions. Universal ethical principles are applied. Mutual respect is valued as a universal principle. Laws are seen as valid only in so far as they promote the principle of justice. Therefore, there is an obligation on people to disobey an unjust law. Decisions are met categorically and in an absolute way rather than with conditions attached. This is based on Immanuel Kant's "categorical imperative". The stage six thinker will imagine what they would have done if they were given the same circumstances as a person in a particular situation. The action is not a means but an end in itself. A person acts because an action is believed to be right in principle, not because it is instrumental, expected, legal or previously agreed upon. "I will behave in school because this gives everyone a chance to attain a good education and I wish to respect that right because it is important". For every right an individual holds, there is a corresponding responsibility. Kohlberg found it very difficult to find people who

consistently operated out of stage six in their moral reasoning. It is likely that people rarely actually reach stage six.

Kohlberg noted that some people seemed to have regressed in moral development. This led him to revise his theory. The result was that he postulated the existence of sub-stages wherein the emerging stage of moral development had not yet been fully integrated into the personality, and thus acted as transitional stages. For example, he wrote of a stage 4+ or 4½, which he saw as a transition stage between stages four and five. At stage 4+ the person has become disaffected with the arbitrary nature of law and order reasoning. Culpability may be reversed from the individual to the culpability of society itself. When the interests of society conflict with the interests and choices of the individual, societal interests are usually seen as relative and morally wrong. Kohlberg noted that this was often exhibited by students entering college.

Kohlberg also suggested the possibility of a seventh stage of moral reasoning: Transcendental Morality or Morality or Cosmic Orientation. This stage would link religion with moral reasoning (see James Fowler's stages of faith development). His speculation remained at a theoretical level since he had such difficulty in finding research participants who characterised even stage six.

Kohlberg believed that the progression through the stages was reasonable and that one could not skip stages in the process. It is possible, he believed, for an individual to see the shortcomings in his/her moral reasoning and therefore to look to the next level or stage. If the current stage of moral reasoning is found to be too limiting or unsatisfactory, moral development may progress to the next stage because it is seen as more adequate.

It can be argued that Kohlberg's emphasis on justice as the key moral principle is too rigid and that it excludes other principles. Carol Gilligan (*In a Different Voice*, 1982) argues that there is a male gender bias in this focus on justice since in many females there is a stronger moral concern for care of others as a principle than justice. For Gilligan, the focus of moral reasoning in her research was people's desire to care for others, and to establish and maintain connectedness with them. This seemed to be especially true of females, although not exclusively so. Kohlberg's theory was developed on the basis of empirical research using only a small sample of male participants who were children and is therefore limited. Gilligan and others suggest that his theory takes insufficient account of the moral concerns of females. Instead, Gilligan suggests a moral theory called an "ethics of care" which she claims is more typical (although not exclusive) among females.

To conduct his research Kohlberg used moral dilemmas to determine which stage of moral reasoning an individual uses. The dilemmas were fictional short stories containing the need for a person to make a moral decision. The research subjects were asked a series of open-ended questions regarding each moral problem, such as what they thought the right course of action would be and justifications for certain actions being right or wrong. The most famous dilemma that he used was the **Heinz dilemma** ("Heinz Steals the Drug

in Europe”): A woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to produce. He paid \$200 for the radium and charged \$2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman’s husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together \$1,000, which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said: “No, I discovered the drug and I’m going to make money from it”. So Heinz got desperate and broke into the man’s store to steal the drug for his wife.

Should Heinz have broken into the laboratory to steal the drug for his wife?
Why or why not?

In Kohlberg’s theory there is little real importance attached to what the participant thinks Heinz should do. What is important, however, is the justification offered by the participant (the form of the response). Here are some of the arguments that could be suggested for each stage:

Stage 1 (**Obedience**): Heinz should not steal the drug because he would be sent to prison and that would make him bad. Or: Heinz should steal the drug because it’s really only worth \$200, not \$2000 and in any case he already offered to pay for it later and he wasn’t stealing anything else.

Stage 2 (**Self-interest**): Heinz should not steal the drug because it would be horrible to be in prison and he would probably languish over a jail cell more than his wife’s death. Or: Heinz should steal the drug because he will be happier if he saves his wife, even if he has to go to prison for it.

Stage 3 (**Conformity**): Heinz should not steal the drug because stealing is wrong and he is not a criminal; you cannot blame him, he tried to do everything he could to get the drug honestly. Or: Heinz should steal the drug because his wife expects it and he wants to be a good husband to her.

Stage 4 (**Law-and-order**): Heinz should not steal the drug because it is against the law to steal; it is illegal. Or: Heinz should steal the drug but also he should take the punishment for his crime as well as paying the druggist what he owes. Actions have consequences and criminals cannot just disobey laws with and expect no consequences.

Stage 5 (**Human rights**): Heinz should not steal the drug because the scientist has a right to fair compensation. Even though his wife is very sick it is still not right to steal the drug. Or: Heinz should steal the drug because everyone has the right to life, regardless of the law.

Stage 6 (**Universal human ethic**): Heinz should not steal the drug because others may also be in need of the same medicine just as much, and their lives are equally important.

Or: Heinz should steal the drug because saving a human life is most important and is a more fundamental value than the property rights of another person.

Adapted from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence_Kohlberg